DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 096 671 CS 201 563

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TITLE	What's New in Language Arts: Oral Language.
INSTITUTION	American Association of Elementary, Kindergarten, and Nursery Educators, Washington, D. C.
PUB DATE	[74]
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, NEA Center, 1201 Sixteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 (Stock No. 282-08880, $0.25; Make checks payable to E/K/N/E-NEA)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Creative Expression; Educational Research; Elementary Education; *Expressive Language; *Listening Skills; Oral Communication; *Oral Expression; Speech; *Speech Skills; Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS	*Oracy

ABSTRACT

This leaflet explores the rediscovery of the importance of oral language, greatly prompted by the influence of linguists on school practices since 1960. The term "oracy," a recently coined British term which refers specifically to the ability to use the skills of speaking and listening, is discussed in several contexts: new information concerning children, oracy, and teaching; a sample of research in oracy; and implications for teaching skill development in oracy. A list of references is provided. (JM)

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What's New in Language Arts:

Oral Language

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"There is no gift like the gift of speech; and the level at which people have learned to use it determines the level of their companionship and the level at which their life is lived."

This line from a prestigious British report on education (1) reflects the new awareness during the last ten years in the English-speaking world of the importance of the uses of speech in school. Undoubtedly, this rediscovery of the importance of oral language comes to a large degree from the increasing influence of linguists upon school practices since about 1960. More generally, television and the enthusiasms of its apostles, such as Marshall McLuhan, may have had an effect. The change must have come to some degree from our recognition of the need for more effective oral communication in a world in which people are crowded into smaller and smaller geographical spaces. It is undoubtedly due in some measure to the fact that English is fast becoming the world's second most popular spoken language. Doubtless there are other reasons. Whatever they are, in recent years educators have been increasingly concerned with the improvement of children's oral language.

ORACY

This change implies that oral language has been neglected in the past. This neglect is shown most vividly, perhaps, by the absence in English of a term that distinctly and uniquely refers to the ability to use the skills of speaking and listening. The British have recently coined a term which may hold, *oracy*. (2) A modern child should be numerate, *orate*, and literate. The NOL skills in our age may become what the "three R's" were in the nineteenth century.

This does not imply, however, that oracy is, or should become, a "subject," any more than literacy has been made one (many wish the same could be said for numeracy). It is not "speech training," either of a remedial nature or of the kind occupied with formal dramatics, interpretive arts, or the giving of prepared speeches. Instead, it is proposed that oracy is a general condition of learning that contributes to all subjects or activities in the elementary school. The teaching of oracy should be aimed at developing what Wilkinson (2) has called "Reciprocal Speech—the creative utterance which is necessary at any and every hour of the day when we speak with individuals or small groups of people in varying situations and they respond." It is different from the "casual" style, however, where slang and ellipsis are frequently characteristics, and thus is more elaborated than the "Restricted Code" described by Bernstein (3), in which all the words and organizing structure of the language is wholly predictable for speaker and listener.

Coining the word oracy does not solve the persisting problems of teaching it, unfortunately. We still have little striking research evidence of the nature of oracy, how to define its skills, how to give it the importance it deserves in our curriculum, and how to determine

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which of its critical elements instruction can foster and which should be allowed to mature without structured teaching. In short, we still need to discover which are the crucial skills and subskills of oracy, in what sequence they should be taught (if at all), especially in relation to the parallel development of literacy, and what are the best methodologies to use with which children.

The problems obviously are very complicated, so much so that some have despaired of finding needed solutions. Huckleberry and Strother, for example, believe that "while our work in reading, writing, and arithmetic has become sufficiently standardized that a pupil can progress logically and often peacefully in his ascent through the grades, there is no such standard for training the voice and body to convey meaning and feeling to others. Nor is a standard ever likely to develop." (4) Despite this prediction, a reasonable one if based on past practices, a more optimistic view—that children can gain the skills of oracy in logical and peaceful ways—can be taken if teachers understand and adopt new information on the matter.

CHILDREN, ORACY, AND THE TEACHER

We note, then, at the outset that most new information (some is older but has been overlooked) about children, oracy, and teaching is cautionary or critical of present practices. For example, psycholinguists and child psychologists tell us:

1. *Children of school age have adequate language skills for the instruction in oracy we may want to give.* They understand and speak enough words for this purpose. Moreover, these children have mastered the very complex grammar of their language, and thus speak all the kinds of sentences English contains. Quite remarkably they learn their grammar by generalizing about it, and not through imitation. We should not be especially concerned, say these experts, about the approximately 25 percent of beginners who retain some vestiges of baby talk. "It is assumed that development of sound discrimination and a few friendly suggestions from

other children or the teacher will correct these few straggling examples." (4) (Only about 5 percent of fourth grade children use some baby talk.) The child upon school entrance, then, is "ready" to use and improve his skills of oracy. If he does not, linguists imply, the fault lies with the teacher, his methods, and the school content rather than with the child. One can also be led to believe that those few with "specific language learning disabilities" have inherited characteristics, and therefore should not be thought of as products of poor environment or instruction. (5) All this suggests that the conclusions sometimes made that children are not ready to develop oracy skills are misjudgments.

2. *Oral language is the language.* Written language is unnatural, arbitrary, incomplete, irrational (the spelling system), and difficult to learn. The learning of oral language, on the other hand, appears to be innate, developmental, and maturational. This growth is universal to children, is common in all cultures, and is learned easily with a great deal of self-motivation on the child's part. The schedule of the acquisition of this growth follows a fixed sequence. It may be retarded for some children, but unless there is gross physiological impairment the order of attainment in children remains constant. This growth cannot be stimulated or accelerated by special or unnatural training or experience unless developmental factors also prevail. Thus, formal school training not in keeping with the developmental schedule of the individual child may harm, not help. Instruction that does not highly involve self-motivation and instruction to reform oracy through written language are ineffective.

3. *Differences in the grammar in dialects in English are not "right" or "wrong," yet some oral language does appear to be inherently inferior.* No doubt most dogmatic and authoritative views held about the superiority of a dialect stem from social prejudices rather than from evidence that one dialect communicates meaning better. Nevertheless, there is some evidence, collected especially by Bernstein (3), that implies that certain language is deficient in communicating. Bernstein found that in lower socioeconomic classes the adults exert "no pressure on the child to make his experiences explicit in a verbally differentiated way." The lower class child, he believes, develops a language that is less capable of coping with abstract ideas and logical connections, and with the nuances and intonations which are critical to effective human relationship. Loban (6) did not extend his conclusions about the language of such children into this area, but they seem to support Bernstein's conclusions.

Nevertheless, teachers are not advised to chastise a pupil for using a nonstandard dialect he learned at home. Rather, the task of the school should be to teach all children to speak and listen in a flexible and accurate way, and in a graceful, resourceful, and lively style, while at the same time making it possible for them to discover that dialects and levels of usage other than their own are justifiable.

Since all materials written for school children are in the standard dialect, and since the teacher speaks it, children cannot avoid being exposed to it. The question remains: To what extent should the teacher deliberately bring in examples of standard dialect and drill the child on them? Some have recommended that nonstandard speaking children receive no instruction in any dialect other than their own until the fourth grade. (7) This advice would not only be impossible to implement, but it would be wrong in its assumption that children in these grades should not learn dialectology (the geographic and/or social varieties of language, or more simply, how one communicates the same idea through different words, grammar, and phonology).

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Instead, dialectology should become an *established part of the oracy curriculum,* for at least three reasons. *First,* the nonstandard speaker must know standard English if he is to reduce the social prejudices and vocational sanctions the nonstandard dialect brings. *Second,* it is equally important for children who speak the standard dialect to learn about and to accept without bias the dialectical differences in their society, and so to realize that speakers of different dialects really can communicate. To help children to accomplish this, we must reject the conservatism exemplified by Ecroyd: "No teacher who has a nonstandard pattern of speech should be permitted in an elementary classroom." (8) Furthermore, Ecroyd claims that the teacher "should not shift in and out of standard speech in the classroom." Quite the reverse should hold! The modern teacher should know the nonstandard dialect of his community well enough to shift to it easily when teaching dialectology. *Third,* the language learned by deprived children as a "Restricted Code" (Bernstein) may well develop a narrower range of language potential than normal, which results in children capable of solving comparatively few linguistic problems. Learning a new code may be necessary for full cognitive development.

4. *Children learn more about language from out-of-school influences than from teachers.* "The child's parents and his kinship group will have contributed more to the sum total of the child's linguistic ability than all the teachers in his school." (9) We have striking evidence of this from observations on nonstandard speaking children whose experiences with standard dialect speaking teachers have done little to affect their own language. This and other evidence argues strongly for the substitution of the study of dialect for the attempts at dialect purging that so often take place in schools.

5. *Oral language is an imperfect symbol system.* Connections we make between the words we use and the things in nature are quite arbitrary. Words, which do not adequately represent the natural environment, consequently become abstractions. These abstractions, in turn, are given different levels of complexity to fit different situations. We are reminded, however, that communication operates best when words are defined operationally, as, for example, when we treat metaphors as analogies, not statements of fact, and when we distinguish between reports, inferences, and judgments. (10)

Not only do the abstractions we make of words exist in our minds rather than in nature: our identity fogs our thinking about the use of them. All these facts from linguistics studies should emphasize to the teacher that he be humble rather than authoritarian—flexible, pragmatic and descriptive rather than prescriptive—as he teaches language to children. The acceptance of the idea given here that all oral language is necessarily ambiguous does not mean that the child should be taught to suppress or eliminate natural ambiguities, however. Instead, he should learn how to give his listeners the evidence needed to resolve them.

RESEARCH IN ORACY: A SAMPLING

Much of a commonsensical nature has been reported from research on children's growth in oral language. One would assume, as has been reported, that language becomes more complex and lengthy, and that the child knows more words, as he grows older. There is some evidence that girls outstrip boys, at least in the early years. Not generally held is the evidence that has been gathered on how language represents cognitive development. (11) Findings as to young children's exceptional degree of control over the grammar of language have been startling. The research noted above that indicates that deprived children use oral language which may restrict their language potential is full of unresolved implications.

Very important to primary teachers have been the findings that the *amount* a child speaks is only slightly related to his learning to read (and to write?). The *complexity* of his speech appears more highly related to reading ability.

Attempts to show that listening can be taught as a general skill flounder on the probability that the standardized test used to measure the skill measures a general verbal competence rather than listening as a separate and unique ability. (12)

Conclusions from data so gathered and used for comparisons with other language learning therefore must remain suspect at this point. The divergent forms and patterns of written and oral language have been recognized. Whether these differences affect learning to read and to write is a matter still to be determined, however. (13) Most importantly, as has been noted, the basic research as to the nature of oracy and as to which crucial subskills need teaching in which ways still needs to be completed. One must therefore remain suspicious of those who readily talk about the methods and means of evaluating oracy without justifying what they measure and why. (9)

It is hoped that in the future reviews of research on oracy will improve. An example of the confusing manner of much reporting in the past is *Interrelationships Among the Language Arts.* (14) In this monograph the reader seldom knows what the reviewer means by speaking ability. Studies that involved only articulation are lumped together with those that dealt with fluency, diversity of vocabulary, structure, and function or style. In the future much more care needs to be taken if such reviews are to be useful for the persons for whom they are intended.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

In the light of all the above, how should the teacher help his pupils to develop skills in oracy? I believe that the above discussion supports a methodology that follows this format:

1. *The pupil in the classroom*

must act like a linguist. He should be involved in defining, question asking, data gathering, observing, classifying, generalizing, and verifying the various aspects of his and his classmates' language. (15) The method used then must be inductive, set up so the pupil can discover rather than remember. The teacher must avoid the twin evils of proscribing and prescribing language. He should instead encourage children to describe for themselves what language they use in various social situations. Included here would be activities to find out how people from different socioeconomic classes talk. The pupils would investigate what the language of a particular situation is, how much they know of it, and how it is different from what they know best.

2. *The activities used should be those that involve normal oral language in true language situations.* Since skills in oracy will come best from practice in specific communication situations as they occur naturally in the classroom, the task of the teacher is to arrange such situations. Projects that require children to seek and relay information from other teachers, parents, neighbors, businessmen, public employees, librarians, newspapermen, clergymen, etc., of necessity develop oracy skills. Also, common sense tells that oracy functions well when we are being talked about, when our favorite ideas are discussed, when we are given requested information, when we are warned of personal danger, when someone says something with which we disagree strongly, when we try to judge fairly in an argument, and when speakers are entertaining and interesting. To be emphasized, then, are spontaneous speech and discussion about personal and universal problems, conversation, role-playing, verse choir, and creative drama, and the reading of short passages aloud to illustrate an idea. On the other hand, prepared talks, panel discussions before the entire class, artificial speech situations (language arts and speech textbooks for the elementary teacher are full of these, unfortunately), and rehearsed and recorded programs or "speech days" should be avoided. Particularly undesirable are the artificial speech situations. They are wrong in their assumption that general sets or abilities in oracy can be developed, retained, and transferred when needed. Since the advocates of such activities have provided no evidence that they produce better results than spontaneous and natural oracy, one may well resist their advice.

3. *The classroom structure should be informal and spontaneous.* The teachers' plans should be flexible. Results are gratifying when the class is organized into groups as small as the social maturity of their members will allow. Small group encounters stimulate the establishment of natural language situations and the use of the inductive approach to examining and describing language. They make possible the reciprocal speech which is the essence of oracy and add to the opportunities that children have to learn from one another. Small group instruction or activities are, in other words, imperative to the development of oracy. Moreover, without these elements growth in oracy inevitably falters.

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